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### A GRAND TRADITION



*Panoramic view in the 1940s of the Rutland Fairgrounds,  
a local landmark for over a century.*

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## **A GRAND TRADITION**

### ***Fact and Fancy About the Rutland Fair***

### **1846-1953**

by Theophilus Flood

It wasn't such a bad day, a might chilly, but clear, when I caught a ride in Judge Burt's fancy buggy to my first Fair — my first fair in Rutland County, that is. Up to that time I'd been to all the Fairs and Spectacles there was, so this 'un was new to me.

It was new to the county too, that September of 1846 (yep, that long ago, for I have a reasonable number of years on me). Y'see, a bunch of fellers like Fred Button from Clarendon and Bill Farnum and J. C. Thrall of Rutland proper, had got together and formed what they called "The Rutland County Agricultural Society." They put out that it cost two government dollars to join and had the advantage of getting a man out of the house at times when stayin' home could get too close, if you get my meanin'.

Anyway, these fellers and others like Rich Hock from Brandon, Dan Crofoot of Benson, Gideon Tabor of Mt. Tabor and Ben Maxham of Sherburne all got this thing going, mainly to put on a Fair. Now, this Fair was set up so that all the farmers and useful citizens (a category my neighbors have found no cause to put me in) in the County could show off their abilities as to farmin', inventin', cookin' or buildin' contraptions.

They made old Fred Button the President and he put on a pretty good show. Of course, most of it was animals and vegetables and such but, after all, Vermont was feedin' New England at the time and this just showed that Rutland County was doin' its share. Mr. H. T. White, who was the Fair's Clerk, counted over 17 types of awards; anywhere from field crops to working oxen to Saxony Sheep. The wives had all got together, making the best bird pies an' berry tarts, which I naturally partook of generously.

They had this first Fair in Castleton and a great lot of people showed up to eat and drink and watch the Award Committee pass out the prizes. Then we all got to listen to an upliftin' speech by Professor Middleton Goldsmith of the Castleton Medical College.

When the sun was going down, everyone started to drift away; kids sleepin' on their father's shoulder and I caught the Judge just leading his grays out onto the turnpike. On the way back to Rutland it rained the blue dickens. 'Course that is Vermont, but everyone cussed it just the same. That was the first day of Rutland Fair and since I have a peculiar way of seein' (and livin') into the future, I knew there was going to be some great times to come.

And I was right. The Society decided if one day was a good thing, they should expand to two days. The Fair itself was plunked down in any part of the County that'd have it. They added shade trees to the previous exhibits along with horses and the maple sugar (the Abenaki Indians taught us how to make it) and poultry. One year they added on plowin' contests.

Then, around 1852, (a feller named Frederick Holbrook was President of the Society then) they began to move to Rutland City. By 1860, the Society had gotten hold of land south of downtown Rutland (as I recollect the Chaffee family were principal owners of this land) solely for the purpose of putting on a Fair. A particular item was put into the leasing of this land, to wit (as the lawyers—which Rutland always had a great lot of—say) that a Fair must be held every year or the land goes back to the heirs of the original owners. This innocent little part of the lease was to make a lot of people over the years move “heaven and earth” to keep the Fair goin'. Fact is, one Fair officer was heard to say, “We'll have a Fair, by God, even if we only have one pumpkin to show.”

I want to say right here that I was in “faithful attendance” at the Fair, as the good women of Rutland's Anti-Slang Association would put it. Sometimes I'd do a little work, like cleanin' up the horse droppin's during those plowin' contests, or repairin' stock pens and the like. One year ('twas 1858 or so) I had me a walnut shell game for the enlightenment of some of these farmers. I provided a jug or two of good hard cider and free cigarros for the winners. Well, we were perking along pretty good (for about two hours) when them fellers from the Society caught wind of this and made me shut down. In any case, I never missed a Fair.

But comin' into the 1860's, folks in Vermont and the U.S.A. had other things on their minds. Like the Civil War. A lot of Vermonters went down south for this fight and everybody was proud of them. 'Course a lot **didn't** go and some that went didn't like what they saw and left. We called them “skedaddlers.” Yep, we had our share of skedaddlers and copperheads but most everybody in Rutland was behind Father Abraham and the “Union Forever.”

At the Fair, we were gettin' bigger with more produce and animals being shown, and more people comin'. (You notice how I stuck that “we” in there—fact is, I wasn't one of those fellers that started the whole shebang even though I was there from the beginnin'.) Why, one year I sold fried cakes but they put me down-wind of the pig pens, and what with a most peculiarly hot Fair week that year (about 1862), I didn't make much money. But there I go ramblin' on.

Rutland Fair was still being' held at the end of September and, as I mentioned before, it was firmly set in Rutland City by now. The weather always did what it does in Vermont—change. One day we'd be freezin', the next too hot to breathe and the next, it'd rain and there would be sheep judgin' in the mud. This kind of weather didn't do much for the ladies' pies and flowers but they kept their tempers, not bein' as outspoken in 1863 as they became in years ahead.

The Rutland Fire Department would parade and they were a wondrous sight with their red sashes, white gloves and brass fire trumpets.

Now there was one thingamajig that took my fancy as I was looking at the latest wonders in Mechanics Hall on the Fairgrounds. The Award Committee had given it first prize. It was embellished with the title of Universal Clothes Wringer and the drummer there said that at the 1862 London Exposition, this marvelous contraption had wrung out 24 thicknesses of carpeting. I let the drummer know that was right smart wringin' and went on my way.

But the Fair thrived, at least when it came to agricultural products. Floral Hall never looked more beautiful. There was a self-rocking cradle. John Ketchum brought in 150 varieties of apples with such names as New England Beauties, Bailey's Spice,

Baldwins, Maiden's Blush and Seek-No-Further. On display was a peck of white tomatoes. Someone had a squash weighing 152 pounds. Someone else had invented a goat-driven butter churn. No wonder from Afghanistan to Hong Kong, they called it Yankee Ingenuity.

Here's what the *Rutland Herald* had to say in 1863 (after complimenting the Society for the fine agricultural show).

"... not one side show! Citizens of Rutland have got up a quiet, rational exhibition of their industrial products without the aid of foreign buffoons and baboons. . ." " 'Ceptin' those that were home grown," someone said, but I lay no claim to sayin' things like that.

Folks elsewhere in the state seein' Rutland County havin' such a great success with our Fair, elected to have a "State Fair" in Rutland. This was in 1873 and there was a terrible hoo-raw about it. Y'see the "State Fair" was coming in about a week before our own. 'Course when Rutland Fair finally got started, there wasn't much attendance, folks were just "faired" out. But we had some pretty good times anyway. A fine trotter named Kitty Thorn won the County Purse. The Sherman Cornet Band of Winooski entertained us. Showing some first class stock were Jess Billings with a powerful boar, John Mead and his Merino Sheep; A. S. and J. W. Cramton won the cattle premiums. Mrs. Lola Johnson displayed 100 pieces of "female handiwork" and Mr. Edwin Congdon of Clarendon won a blue ribbon with his fine blooded mare.

Wal, our noses got a little out of joint with that 23rd Annual Exhibition of the Vermont State Agricultural Society and Wool Growers Association (after all, they had 3500 people go to it). I kinda snuck into this one myself, feelin' a little disloyal, but you know me, I can't resist a Fair. Why, they even had the Rev. W. H. H. Murray speakin' about youth leavin' the agricultural scenes of Vermont. He was a natural stemwinder and worth standin' in the sun for.

That was some year — 1876 — the 100th birthday of America — every time you turned around some dang fool was settin' off fireworks. I guess I shouldn't complain. Vermont had survived and along with it the whole U.S. for nigh onto 100 years, even in spite of our own best efforts to do ourselves in. Our own poet laureate, Julia Caroline Ripley Dorr, contributed a poem extolling the virtues of a doormat. Oh, it was an exciting year. Out West, Gen. George Armstrong Custer managed to get himself and his men massacred at the Little Big Horn; the Dalton Boys pulled the last great day-time bank robbery on horseback at Northfield, Minn. and, in Rutland, the Young Ladies Anti-Slang Association met for a brief time. (I understand they got hollerin' at each other.)

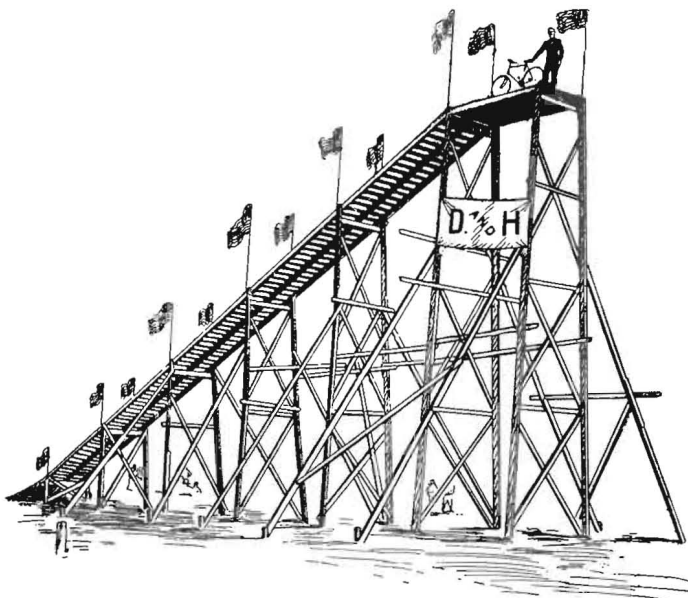
But Rutland Fair stuck with harness racing as its big attraction. Improvers of the breed mourned the death of the famous trotter "Ethan Allen" who had been foaled right here in Vermont. George Fox of Rutland took a first prize with his crop of tobacco.

By 1883 with Congress resounding in battle for the Great Whiskey Fight (you'd better look that up yourself, just readin' about it makes a body thirsty), and Denman Thompson appearin' as Uncle Josh Whitcomb at the Opera House, our Fair opened on a very cold day. But attendance was good and we had a Bicycle Race as part of the festivities. We had a whopper of a speaker — State Senator Grant — who told the gaping crowd that agriculturalists can grow potatoes and that he was agin Nihilism, Communism and Socialism. He said the best fertilizer for Vermont was brains. This last remark put me in a brown study and, while sharin' a whiskey bottle behind Mechanics Hall, some one said if brains was fertilizer, corn's goin' to be in short supply. That led to words and what with one thing or another, we had a little fight and tore off half the back of the Hall.

We also had a stock parade in front of the Grandstand led by Hatch's Military Band. By the time the 1880's arrived, things were really hummin' around Rutland. The W. C. T. U. (you don't need to spell that out, Jethro) elected Mrs. A. S. Adams as president. These good folk got up enough money to send one man to the Keeley Institute to take the cure. A rumor got started they was lookin' fer me, but there was no truth to it.

In 1893, the Fair was held for three days at the beginning of October and we were startin' to get some real shows. For instance, they got all the stock together and had a Grand Cavalcade, front and reared by the Howe Scale Band and Crossman Drum Corps. Now, when folks saw all those oxen and horses and Holsteins and the like all lined up, nothin' would do but they had to get in (horn in, y'might say) on the act. So they all got dressed up in costumes—devils and pirates and milkmaids and tin soldiers—and paraded around with all the cows. It was a dandy show.

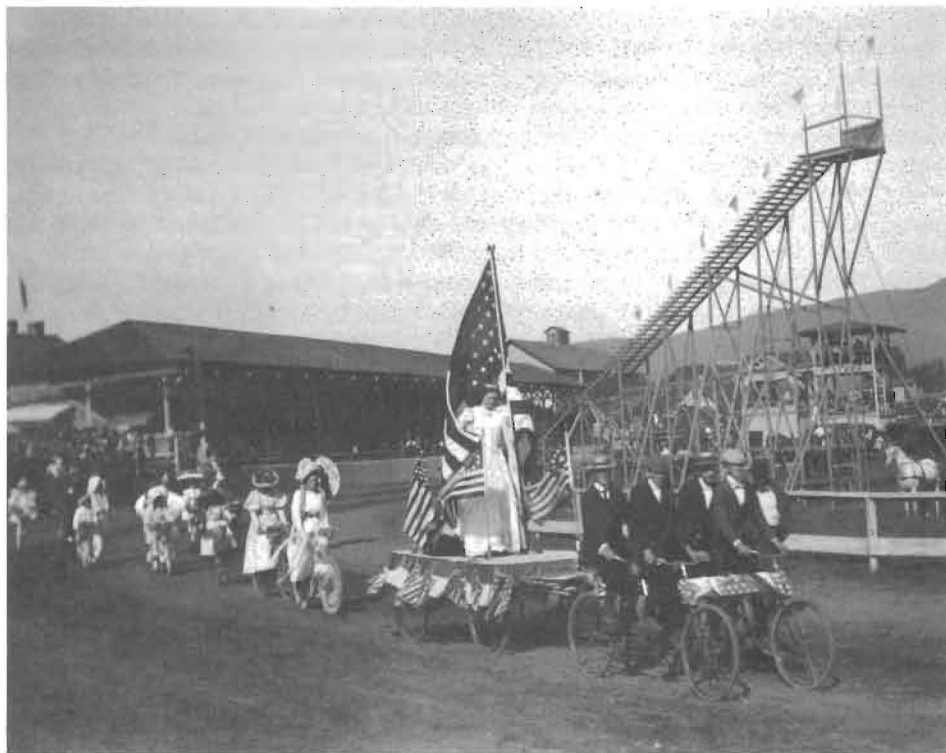
That's not all—there was Broncho Charlie who bedazzled the crowd with his fancy ropin' and ridin'. Charlie laid claim to have rode with Buffalo Bill Cody and his Wild West Show. And we had a balloon ascension; Mr. Venderveer who lived on Woodstock Ave. when he wasn't ridin' high in a balloon. But the one I liked to watch



*The above cut represents the 75 portable steps that Prof. Wright rides down on his "D. & H." Bicycle. He also rides up 25 steps. To erect these portable steps it requires:*

<i>1,056 feet of 2 = × 2 = joist</i>	<i>298 screws</i>
<i>767 feet of 1 × 3 strips</i>	<i>3,000 4-inch wire nails</i>
<i>425 feet of 1 × 9 boards</i>	<i>3 gallons of paint</i>
<i>237 feet of 1-8 × 1 band iron</i>	<i>Height, 41 ft. 3 in. from ground</i>
<i>672 bolts</i>	<i>Width of step 4 ft. 4 in.</i>
<i>400 feet of rope</i>	<i>Total cost of construction, \$106.05</i>

*Open for engagements. Write for terms.  
Prof. J. M. Wright, Fort Edward, N.Y.*



*Parading in 1893 in front of the Grandstand and the Portable Steps.*

was Professor J. M. Wright, who put up a great long set of steps and proceeded to ride his bicycle all up and down em'. Don't to this day see how he did it, but he did.

There may have been a record of sorts in attendance with 4000 people crowding on the grounds the second day of the Fair. By this time, we had us a full fledged "Midway Plaisance" and between the fortune tellers, grab joints and hanky panks, a body could come away clean educated.

Before I leave the century, I have to mention that Rutland Fair always bowed to the agricultural end of things—the premium competitions in things that grow and things that go—and that's what attracted country and city folks to the Fair—a chance to show off.

Well sir, the country and Vermont came rip-snortin' into the new century fresh from the Spanish-American War with Teddy Roosevelt. The Russians and Japs already engaged in a shootin' war. Rutland saw the largest Labor Day Parade ever—about 21 unions including cigar makers and quarrymen. The parade went right up to the Fairgrounds and the Event (Rutland Fair) opened the next day (Tuesday, September 8, 1903) with the Rutland City Band providing the music.

What made things interesting was that the Vermont State Agricultural Society and the Rutland County Agricultural Society decided to have a joint Fair. And what a Fair! The Poultry Exhibit alone pulled in 1000 squawkers and some real exotic types like Egyptian Geese and Japanese Silkies. And the whole fruit exhibit prizes went to the Farmer Brothers of Rutland. Harness racing was king at the Fairgrounds with a little beauty of a pacer named "Irene P." winnin' the race for road horses.



*Even in 1913 prominent national figures attended the Fair, such as Teddy Roosevelt.*

Why, we got so big for our britches, that we had a national speaker—Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, J. H. Brigham, who'd come all the way from Washington, D.C. to see how it's done.

But it was the 1913 Fair that stands out in my memory, because it was one of the greatest celebrations Rutland has even seen and because it was the Fair's darkest hour. Dark, because the 1912 Fair had finished \$3000 in the hole and it didn't look like the Fair could continue. Wal, I'm not one to ladle on the maple syrup when it comes to praisin' my neighbor, but I had to hand it to two Rutland businessmen who "saved" the Fair. How this was done is "writ up" elsewhere in this tellin'. Right now, I want to tell you about 1913.

Get it into your mind that Rutland City and the Fairgrounds were completely decorated—red, white and blue bunting, streamers and lights: red, green, yellow, orange and such. Everywhere you looked something was going on. I recall puffing on a Cremo and readin' the marquee of the Opera House: "What Happened to Mary"—a Spicy Farce. 'Course Rutland had come into the modern day we had the flickers (some jelly beans called them movies) with vaudeville; Ruth Hayward in "The Mystery of Corner House"—a three-reel feature plus the Herberts and the Christies on stage.

An outfit called the Rutland Businessmans' Association sponsored a huge city-wide carnival—there were concessions and faikirs lining the streets—telling fortunes and selling jawbreakers—and vaudeville acts all around town. Platforms in Depot Park Green at the Bardwell corner and Berwick Corner bounded with such acts as Aliniey

and his Apes and Melville the Flying Trapeze Artist. Up in Main St. Park, Prof. Rainy showed his Famous Jungle Pictures. There were fireworks and parades and everywhere the Knights of the Kerosene Torch plied their trade.

The whole city nearly shut down Fair Week. Trainloads of people poured into the City.

The Fair opened Monday, September 1, 1913, and the first event was a School Boy Athletic Contest sponsored by the Eastern New York and Vermont Interscholastic Association. Brattleboro High won it with Rutland second.

There was a children's Parade and the Bristol Trained Horses and a Better Babies Contest. (Downtown Wilson's Clothing Co. and the James A. Lillis Clothing Co. advertised that they would hold your parcels when you went to the Fair.) Other merchants and banks also offered hospitality.

The sky over the Fairgrounds was filled with hot air and captive balloons, and we had George Schmitt and his aeroplane "Red Devil" flying around and giving rides to the more adventure-some souls.

All in all it was a grand Fair but there was tragedy. The aeronaut, George Schmitt, and his bi-plane, fell 500 feet to hit nose first on the infield. George was killed when the plane engine landed on top of him. His passenger, Rutland lawyer, J. Dyer Spellman was seriously injured.

Now before the Great War, thanks to F. M. Wilson, Will Davis and a lot of Rutland City businessmen, the Fair was underwritten and it prospered. 'Course in 1917 due to the outbreaks of influenza, the Governor closed her down—folks was supposed to stay away from each other in crowds—and this was the only time the Fair has not "kept."

Now bein' president of the Society didn't bother Will none, he was jest regular folks . . . as a matter of fact he liked it so much he stayed on as President for 26 years and that's the longest anyone has stayed with all them headaches (and fun), although I hear this new feller, Eddie Congdon has a shot at outdoin' ole Will.



*Ed Congdon, who served as president and general manager of the Fair for 17 years and has continued as general manager since 1980.*



Be that as it may, we were in the Roaring Twenties, as the movie feller says and rum running and flaming flappers crept up all the way to Rutland, Vermont. Cal Coolidge from Plymouth was U.S. President and, not being' one fer small talk (unlike yer's truly) he let the times speak for themselves. And speak they did, with illegal booze—some good some bad (ask me, I tried 'em both), all the soljer boys comin' home to a dry country (some of 'em went right back), and everybody investin' in the stock market like there was no tomorrow.

Downtown in Rutland, the Playhouse was showing such theater marvels as "The Old Homestead" with Denman Thompson. You could pay your admission and see The genuine Irene Castle dancing the latest steps and showin' off the latest fashion. An' you'd shed a tear or two for her 'cause her husband, Vernon, got himself killed in a military plane crash during the Geat War. Anyway, us young fellers would slick down our hair with brillantine, dress in our bells, and stand outside Shangraw's Drugstore and whistle at the girls. Some of the farm boys called us "Jelly Beans" but what did they know 'bout big city ways. And we'd go to the movies. How we loved the movie stars . . . there was Bebe Daniels, Glenn Hunter, Richard Dix, Lewis Stone, Mary Astor, Pola Negri, Ricardo Cortez, Jack Holt in "The Tiger's Claw," Gloria Swanson, Rudolph Valentino and Lila Lee. My, but couldn't a feller dream away.

The Rutland Fair rolled right along. These were boom times, and the Great Rutland Fair and Live Stock Exhibition showed it. For shows they had the world's greatest driver name of Ray Claypool from Kansas City. There was Miss Mamie Spencer, World's Best Horseback Rifle Shot; fancy trick riding and roping by Miss Reine Hafley; The Amazing Apollo Jumping Horse that could leap over seven cars; Ali Ben Hassen's Wild Tumbling Arabs; Dr. Frederick Do Bell, the electrical wizard of the High Wire; The Apollo Brothers—Zeno, Moll and Carl—who got themselves all painted up in bronze and considered themselves three perfect specimens. That was the 1923 Fair and 10,000 people came on Opening Day, Sept. 3. The Midway blazed with lights even though it rained a little bit, and of course we had fireworks. There was some decent harness racing with Charles Direct going at a 2:15 pace, Natiguey coming in on a 2:17 trot and Col Bidewell scorching the track at a 2:09 pace. There was a large Machinery Exhibition and Brand New Car Show. And my favorite tune of the day was "When You Walked Out, Someone Else Walked Right In" played by the Knickerbocker Orchestra.

Well Sir, the Twenties danced right along with everybody takin' flyers on the stock market and figgerin' that good times would never end. I didn't worry too much 'cause most any money I had went in one pocket and out the other. We had good fairs during this time with old Will bringing some fine entertainment. Seems like there was a lot of auto racin', everybody interested in seein' how fast a car could go. 'Course the bootleggers, now **they** had a stake in fast cars. Fact is, sometimes at night, you could hear 'em racing through Rutland, usually up on the highway with the police in hot pursuit. I guess Prohibition wasn't workin' too well.

Anther kind of show we'd have at Rutland Fair was the big Air show. Those fellers who learned to fly durin' the Great War all came home with nothin' to do so they got a hold of some old airplanes and started showin' their stuff all around the countryside. Barnstormin' they called it and their planes were dubbed "Flying Flivvers" or "Jennies." They were a daredevil lot when they'd set those old biplanes down in the middle of the Fairgrounds infield. Wearin' jodhpurs and leather jackets and white silk scarves, they'd git all the gals goin'. Us local fellers didn't go for this much and there were a few fights up around the cattle barns. Anyway, off they'd take and loop-the-loop, do Immelmanns, falling leafs, wing walking and I don't know what all. What a Show.

One morning in late October of 1929, I picked up a copy of "Variety" (I'd gotten into the habit of readin' this show biz paper 'cause of hangin' around those Fair acts) and saw a headline which said WALL STREET LAYS AN EGG.

And so we were in the Depression . . . at least the Nation was. There wasn't much change in Vermont bein' as we were always in a kind of semi-Depression what with the farm prices and all.

Now it was the 1933 Fair that I recollect the most of during this time. The voters had retired Herbert Hoover and elected a new one name of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. FDR, as everyone called him, was a humdinger and promised to get things moving again. And move they did. There was talk of gettin' rid of Prohibition (which we did and called it 'Repeal') and FDR set up the National Reconstruction Administration and everybody had the NRA Blue Eagle in their store windows with a sign that said "We Do Our Part." It was still Depression and 35 cents bought one dozen eggs **and** a pound of bacon, coffee was 23 cents a pound and prime rib was nineteen cents a pound. Eel gray was all the fashion for the ladies, and speakin' of ladies, all their hearts throbbed for Richard Barthelmess in "Heroes for Sale."

Down at the Fairgrounds, the 1933 Fair got off to a wet start with only 8000 people there on Opening Day. That was the year Will, along with Fair Secretary F. S. Nicholson and the Society fellers, got together and decided to name each Fair day after a special event. So things set up this way:

Monday, Sept. 4 — Labor Day  
Tuesday, Sept. 5 — Children's Day  
Wednesday, Sept. 6 — Veteran's Day  
Thursday, Sept. 7 — Governor's Day  
Friday, Sept. 8 — Race Day  
Saturday, Sept. 9 — Automobile Day

Master of Ceremonies for the opening of the Fair was Little Billy Carr and the Central Vermont Electric Company had some dandy new kitchen equipment on display.

(Right in the middle of Fair Week—Sept. 6 to be exact—Repeal was voted in, Hooray, Hooray.)

The governor of the State of Vermont, Stanley C. Wilson came to the Fair with all due dignity and included in his party was Congressman and Mrs. John E. Weeks, Congressman Ernest Gibson, Rutland Mayor Arthur Perkins and Col. and Mrs. Leonard Wing. Col. later was a hero in World War II.

Tooling around the oval for the Fair Auto Races was Fred Frame, 1932 Indianapolis Speedway winner. And, Chief Abbedale, in a harness racing heat, equaled the state pace record of 2:03. Helping out around the grounds during Fair Week were 48 Boy Scouts.

The Thirties rolled on with the U.S. of A slowly climbing out of the Depression. FDR and the Democrats were creatin' all kinds of Bureaus down in Washington and over in Europe a feller named Adolf Hitler was gettin' some notions of conquering the world. I thought at the time "What does that have to do with Vermont" and I sure found out later on.

The Fairs got bigger and better, lots of animal acts and auto racing. The Arts and Crafts couldn't have been nicer and down on the trottin' track (in 1939) Billy Direct set a pacing track record of 1:55 which hasn't been beat and Emma Signal set a trotting track record of 2:02¼ which beat the World Race Record Over A Half-Mile Track of 2:04½.

By 1941, America was in another war and once again, all the boys had to march away. Things slowed down around Rutland what with gas rationing and all the girls writing V-Mail to their sweeties and everybody who wasn't in the service chased down to Connecticut or New York where all the war work was.

It bein' wartime and all, the Fair Officials decided on one day Fairs for 1942 and 1943. They were called "One Day Fair and Victory Products Show" and took place around the big green and white 4-H Building. We had canning and garden exhibits, a boy's sawing contest, 4-H Dairy Judging, the Rutland City Band, a Horse Drawing Contest, a ball game and, at night, we had us a dance with the Barn Dance Boys orchestra.

Come 1944, and everybody relaxin' a bit from the war, a full Fair week was declared. And it was just what the doctor ordered. What a crowd, thousands of people crowded the grounds, we made headlines in the *Rutland Herald* . . . everybody was out to have some fun. The great grandstand show included the Victory Parade of 1944, the Montana Kid, Campbell Sisters, Professor George Keller's Jungle Killers, Reg Kehoe's Marimba Queens and A. Robbins the Banana Man.

Victory came and, at least for a while, the world was at peace. We had some marvelous fairs, better attended than ever. Ole Will Davis retired in 1945 and Carleton Wilson took over in 1946. I used to recollect young Carleton dressed up in a chicken suit takin' Fair posters around back in 1912 and now, with him bein' president, I just had to tease him about it.

By 1953, we were back at it again, this time it was the United Nations (mostly the US) and the place was called Korea. Our war hero "Ike" Eisenhower was President. Ike, by the way, came to the Fairgrounds on a Dairy Celebration and got his picture took with a cow. That picture is hangin' up in the Fair Office to this day, and you can even see Joe Crowley peepin' over the cow's shoulder. Down in Washington, our own Vermont Senator Ralph Flanders was busy tellin' off a Senator named Joe McCarthy from another dairy state.

But the Rutland Fair was grand that year of 1953 and what shows we had!

There was Jack Kochman's Hollywood Hell Drivers, Smith's Great Danes and Chimps, The Flying Hartzells, Alfredo Landon and his Midgets and Fireworks on Tuesday and Wednesday. The Fair put up \$2000 in purse stakes for Harness Racing and top horses Bold Salute and Jim Carroll bolted home as winners. We had a wet time that year, with only 27,000 souls coming in on Opening Day—the lowest gate count in several years. But the Aquarium Exhibit did well and it scared the britches off us with a Man Eating Clam, Octopus, the Jaw Bone of a Whale and a mysterious shrunken head. Over in 4-H, there was 400 jars of preserves and Helen and Cheryl Hemenway (15 and 10 years old) won top honors for their canning project. And we had a visit from the Governor, the Honorable Lee E. Emerson.

Now I've been talking 'too long. I see the last light is going off over on the Midway . . . makes me feel a little sad. What's that? A train whistle? I got to be goin'. I got a lot of travelin' to do 'cause there a bunch of Fairs and County Shows I ain't seen. I got to be a-runnin' and mebbe you and me will meet up again next year.

So long, Pal!



*Frank M. Wilson and son Carleton, 1890  
(Copy courtesy of Rutland Herald, Michael Aleshire)*

## A VISIT WITH CARLETON WILSON

Talking to Carleton Wilson about the weather on a hot July night, the visitor allows as how it's "nice" but Mr. Wilson opines that it's a bit "close." And having enagaged in the traditional Vermont way of introduction, Carleton Wilson and his visitor begin the serious business at hand—gazing back down the misty halls of time at Rutland Fair's past.

During the visit, that July night, his only concession to the "closeness" is appearing in shirtsleeves. But the tie is neatly in place, suspenders straight and Carleton Wilson looks the same as if he were presiding over the racks of suits and accessories at his Center St. emporium and *under* the collection of fauna that peered from the walls of the store.

Around 1912, the Fair was in serious financial trouble, being \$3000 in debt and no apparent way to pay it off. It looked as though the Fair could not "keep" and that would be the end of it. Members of the Society approached Frank M. Wilson (Rutland clothier and father of Carleton) to help them. And help he did. Enlisting the aid of Will L. Davis (then treasurer of Rutland City), the two men went to work. They contacted all the businessmen in Rutland "From bootblack to merchant" and solicited \$100 pledges apiece from them. These pledges were put in escrow on a \$5000 bond and the debts were covered. Carleton was sent out by his father as one of the pledge solicitors. It was reported that not one of the pledges had to be called in. The faith Rutland business people put into the Fair evidently was enough to "turn 'er around" and solidify her financial position.

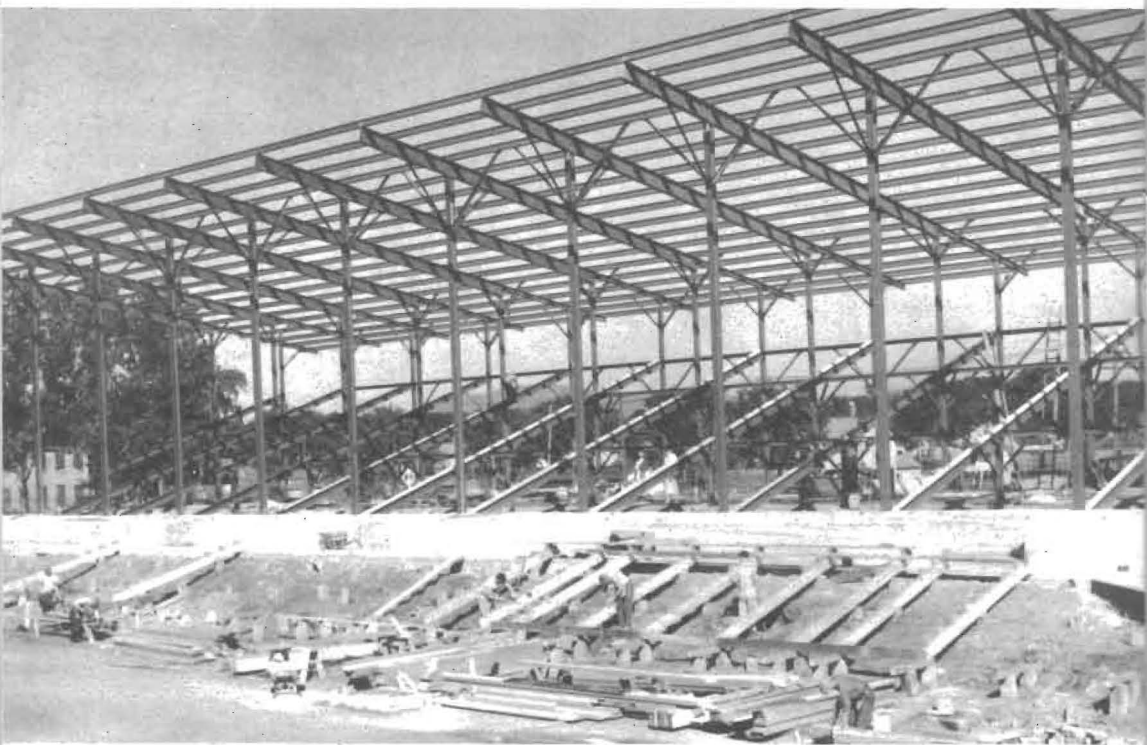
As the visitor and Carleton Wilson talked, memories, like slow blooming flowers, began to unfold. He talked of George Hamid who, so far as Will Davis was concerned, was *the* booking agent for Fair entertainment. George evidently was devoted to Rutland Fair, having first performed at age 9 on the grounds in a tumbling act. Hamid made many trips to Rutland, both on entertainment business and just to visit. One tale concerned the famous William F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill.

One evening, the Carleton Wilsons were entertaining George and Mrs. Hamid at the Fairmont. When offered a cocktail, George demurred and recounted how, as a youth, he had traveled with the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show featuring Annie Oakley. She (for the benefit of younger readers) was one of the great trick shot artists of the time. George recalled how on many a night he would have to help the great Western showman to a couch, pull off his boots and wipe off his white goatee. Buffalo Bill had a great fondness for spirits and George's experience with him made the youngster vow he would never drink like that.

In those days, the Fair had mostly afternoon shows featuring seal, dog and other animal acts. Carleton remembers when all of Rutland celebrated the Fair and he told of one of the first "downtown" shows that was a man who rode his bicycle on a high wire stretched between Rutland Savings Bank and the Mead Block on Center Street. (In the years before World War I, there were all sorts of entertainment in town as well as on the Fairgrounds during Fair Week. Ed. Note)

But Carleton returned again to memories of his father's and Davis' reigns at Rutland Fair. Items. . .

- . . . The Fair being featured in a national horse racing magazine because of a unique feature for harness racing instituted by "F. M." It seems he would refund ½ the entry fee to horsemen that did not win at the Fair Market.
- . . . The Fair Association used to take out rain insurance. It was tough to collect, however, because it had to rain a certain amount between certain hours. It was very specific.



*Destroyed by fire in 1939, the Grandstand was rebuilt between July 20th and August 29th, in time for the 1939 Fair. (Picture, courtesy of David Zsido)*

- . . . The Grandstand being rebuilt in four weeks (just before Fair time) after a conflagration.
- . . . Trimming the Fairgrounds with 15,000 evergreens (taken from a Mendon lot) sharpening the butts and beautifying the grounds.
- . . . Buying huge lots of gladiolus at two cents apiece and festooning the stage and remembering how families would decorate their carriages with garlands of flowers for a day at the Fair.
- . . . Carleton, himself, lining up the grandstand acts and making sure the dog acts and the dancing bears did not get together.

Around 1910, a sign painter named Burt Powell was hired to advertise the Fair in all the byways of Rutland County. He would dress up like an old farmer, straw hat and hayseed, and with young Carleton in tow all decked out like a rooster, they traveled all over the County distributing hand bills and posters.

It was a gentle leavetaking, with the visitor holding the thought of young Carleton hopping earnestly in his rooster suit down a green fringed road on a dusty hot day of long ago. — P.C.



*A carriage decorated with garlands of flowers for a day at the Fair.*

**RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
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